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GERMAN SITUATION IN 1918 AND 1943

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The following notes are prompted by a recent perusal of a small part of the voluminous publications of the Reichstag Committee of Inquiry on the causes of the German collapse of 1918. A more careful study of these materials with a view to preparing a summary and interpretation of the events of 1918 would be valuable. Meanwhile, this includes a tentative impression of the significance of those events for the present situation. The following points are briefly touched upon:

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1. The decision to attack and the condition of the German army before the 1918 spring offensive.
2. The defeat of July 1918 and the decline of morale.
3. Official propaganda to offset the decline, and the counter-effect of the fourteen points.
4. Comparison of present conditions with 1918:
   a. Germany's allies
   b. Failure of the eastern offensive
   c. Home front
   d. Propaganda to bolster morale
5. Psychological warfare opportunities
   a. Ineffectiveness of general principles
   b. The Russian Free Germany tactic
   c. The inappropriateness of "Unconditional Surrender"
   d. Need for a specific Anglo-American program

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1918 and 1943

The collapse of Germany in 1918 can throw light on what is now taking place in Europe, and rightly used, it can be of material assistance in developing a course of action which will shorten the war.

With the collapse of the Russian armies in 1917, Germany's position vis-a-vis the allies in the west became more favorable than it had been at any time since the early days of the war. Nevertheless because of the blockade and the inadequate economic organization of the vast territories under German control, the German high command realized that the central powers were in no position to wage a protracted war. Two additional factors reinforced this conviction, namely, Germany's precarious situation with regard to military manpower replacements, and the prospective arrival of Americans, on a continually increasing scale, in the western theater. These considerations led to the decision, taken late in 1917, that Germany's last opportunity to win the war lay in one last gigantic offensive in the west. All usable troops were transferred from the eastern theater, and the western forces were regrouped and trained for the attack. Forces facing each other along the western front were not far from equal, and the German high command understood that decisive results could only be achieved by superior tactics and training. All the evidence goes to show that early in 1918, the German army by and large was in good fighting shape, superbly trained, and with the most advanced fighting doctrine of any army of the time.

The German army was on the offensive for the better part of four months beginning on March 21. It came very close to accomplishing the goals which the high command had set for it. But in the end it decisively failed. The turning point came with the allied counter-attack in July. Thereafter, the German army and the home front alike progressively disintegrated; the high command knew that the game was up and the only remaining question was how to get the best peace terms possible.

It is significant that morale of the troops stood up well, in spite of inadequate provisioning and severe material hardships, until it became obvious that victory was unattainable. From that point the decline was rapid. Desertion, going over to the enemy, refusal to rejoin units after leave, slacking -- all these became common practices and contributed enormously to the already serious problem of personnel shortages. Naturally, the high command did what it could to combat this disintegration of morale. Only one type of propaganda could be used, and it was exploited to the full. The soldiers were told that in case of defeat the allies would annihilate Germany and ruin its economic life. Therefore, they must fight on, if necessary to the death. There is little doubt that this propaganda had its effect. But it was offset, at least in part, by the American propaganda of Wilson's fourteen points. The fourteen points were seized upon by elements in Germany anxious for an immediate end to the war in order to convince the German troops and people that further resistance was not the only alternative to the economic and political annihilation of the German nation. The American

statements of policy even had some effect in the high command itself, for when Germany finally asked for terms the request was addressed to Wilson who apparently was regarded as less hostile to Germany than the British or French. It may even have been this factor which prevented the war from lasting longer than it did; certainly there were still influential circles in the army and in civilian life (Rathenau, for example, was among them) who believed in the possibility of further resistance even in November.

It is not possible to be certain how far present conditions in Germany resemble those of 1918, nor just what stage of 1918 they resemble most closely. It may be suggested, however, that there are reasons for believing that we have already reached "July," and that the resemblance is close enough to be instructive.

Germany's allies began to fold up in August and September — the first armistice was signed with Bulgaria on September 29. Italy shows that a similar process is under way at present. There is no doubt that in both cases the effect on Germany was great. But much more important is the question whether German troops have yet become convinced of the inevitability of defeat as they were in July 1918. It seems quite possible that the turning point has also been reached in this respect. German prisoners of war, taken in the North African campaign, displayed good morale on the whole as would be expected if this comparison is valid. The reason was that they still believed in the possibility of victory. When asked how the victory was to be achieved, they almost without exception replied that a summer offensive in the east would finish Russia, and then Germany would be free

to turn its full attention to the west. This suggests the quite exceptional importance of the fighting in the east for the problem of morale. We do not know how large the German offensive in the Kursk sector, which was launched in early July, was intended to be. Probably the German soldiers did not either. But at any rate it was definitely offensive action, and it failed. Moreover, Russian counter-attacks developed into a full-scale offensive on a fairly wide front, and that offensive is meeting with great successes, quite comparable to the successes at and following Stalingrad last winter. It seems difficult to believe that this complete change in the aspect of the eastern campaign can be without a profound influence on the thinking of the German army. If the German high command has lost faith in eventual victory, as it did in July 1918, we may expect that the German rank and file is losing its will to suffer and fight for a lost cause, as they did in July and August and September and October 1918.

It is quite probable that the authorities in Germany at present have a much better grip on the home front than they did in 1918. The Nazi system of repression is more thorough and better organized than its predecessor; moreover, there is no question that the German people are much more adequately fed and clothed now than they were then. On the other side of the ledger, however, there is the factor of bombing which did not play a role in 1918. While home front morale may be somewhat better, and repression more effective than in 1918, it is not necessary to assume that the margin of difference is so wide as to be decisive in the face of a hopeless military outlook.

One further parallel is striking. It was pointed out above

that the military authorities attempted to bolster the sagging morale of the army by stressing the inevitability of national annihilation in case of defeat. This is clearly the line of the (much more effective) propaganda of the Nazis at the present time. We may be sure that now, as then, it is doing more than anything else to keep the Germans going.

The foregoing analysis suggests that we are now in a position to hasten the end of the war by appropriate political policy more than at any time since it started. Roosevelt and Churchill have, to a degree, followed the lead of Wilson's fourteen points with the four freedoms and the Atlantic charter. But the German disillusionment with the fourteen points, in 1918 and after, has deprived this kind of general statement of principles of most of its effectiveness. The Russians, on the other hand, have been quick to take advantage of the new situation with the Free Germany manifesto. This manifesto must be regarded as a master stroke of psychological warfare. While informing the Germans of the impossibility of military success, it at the same time offers them an attractive alternative to national annihilation. This is precisely the way to counteract the propaganda of their own leaders and to hasten the disintegration of morale which has doubtless already set in. The characteristic of the Russian step which differentiates it from the 14 points or the four freedoms or the Atlantic charter is that it is specific in its relevance to the German people and tells them just how they can hope to extricate themselves from their present terrible dilemma.

Nothing that the Allied powers have put forward comes close to meeting this cardinal requirement of psychological warfare in the

present stage of the war. On the other hand, the only specific statement of the Anglo-American leaders is very badly suited to the needs and opportunities of the moment. "Unconditional surrender" is not an aim that a German can become enthusiastic about or actively work for. Its content, for them, is entirely negative; it is perfectly compatible with what the Nazis tell them, namely, that their enemies mean to exterminate Germany as a nation. What is wanted is a positive goal for Germany which will dispel this fear and encourage German soldiers and civilians alike to revolt against their leaders and bring the war to an end.

It is no part of the purpose of this paper to suggest what that positive goal should be. Only it may be noted that in the long run we must have hopes for an independent Germany which is far superior, both for us and for the Germans, to what the Nazis have given them. If we could reduce those hopes to concrete form right now, we might shorten the war by as much as six months.

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